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THE WITCHSONG

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THE WITCHSONG

(DAS HEXENLIED)

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BY

ERNST VON WILDENBRUCH

ENGLISH VERSION BY

CARTER S. COLE, M.D.

NEW YORK
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To

HEDWIG REICHER

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FOREWORD

The present version is a rendition of the text rewritten and rearranged by von Wildenbruch for the musical setting especially composed for the poem by Max Schillings.

It differs very slightly from the text as it was first offered to the German public. Some lines were omitted, a few new lines introduced, and the order of the lines occasionally changed to give a better musical and dramatic sequence.

It is quite remarkable that a poem of such exquisite beauty and dramatic intensity should have, for so long a time, received no English version that would bring it to the attention of the English-speaking people.

THE WITCHSONG

At Herzfeld abbey, the prior told
How brother Medardus, grown weak and old,
Could scarcely, he thought, outlive the day:
"Haste, brother confessor," said he, "away
And bid him confess his sins to thee,
Although I know that few they be:
The cloister fifty years to-day
He serves, and in its shades grew gray:
By fasts and penitences he,
Prepared, awaits eternity:
Of all, he is the holiest
And will th' Almighty please the best."
The priest then knocked at Medardus' door—
A silence answered, nothing more:
The confessor crossed the threshold well
And strode within Medardus' cell:
And hour on hour the hours fared;

The monks in wonder looked and glared:
"Medardus, blameless in words and acts—
What can he reveal about sinful facts?"

The vesper bells, with muffled call
To chapel summoned brothers all:
They bowed their heads, they knelt around,
For brother Medardus low prayers re-
sound—
But list! there comes from far away
A pitiful voice in a mournful lay.
The prior rose up from the ground:
The monks gave ear with care profound.
"In Medardus' cell the song is ringing—
It is Medardus who is singing!"
They heard and asked: What can that be?
Those are not prayers and litany:
That sounds like sinful, worldly prate:
And see! and see! within the gate
The confessor hastes, by terror pressed!
"The Devil is the cloister guest!
Medardus to the Tempter fell—
Medardus feels the clutch of Hell!"

The prior lit the holy wand
And held the candle in his hand:
The monks, with tapers lit, beside
The prior walked, with measured stride:
The walls and halls re-echoing rang
The plaintive chant the brothers sang:
"From sinful lust, from Satan's might,
By grace protect us, God of Light."

The cell was open—white, haggard, thin,
Medardus lay on a poor cot within,
His folded hands in fervent prayer,
His eyes with livid fire aglare:
From stammering, quivering lips, a song
Unending, wild, was forced along:
A song so strange, a song forlorn,
Of longing love, of blasphemous scorn—
As if from far-off lands the air
Brought perfumes captivating, rare:
It was a song unlike a note
That ever came from human throat—
A wail of woe—then frenzied zest,
With terror, rapture filled each breast.

The monks their holy candles waved:
"Fly, Satan, let his soul be saved!"
Their crosses swayed, their censers swung—
Medardus all the wilder sung;
And deep each heart atremble rang
The sinful song Medardus sang.
On the monks there stole like a longing dread
A deep, gnawing grief for their lives misled:
They thought of the things they now had not,
Of the days of their youth long since forgot;
And slower, still slower the sound of the choir—
Then silence—they listened, enthralled by his fire.

The prior, pious, zealous, and gray,
With horror filled, stood looking away:
To brother Medardus he called in a tone
In which righteous wrath was plainly shown:

"Wouldst thou the brothers lead astray?
Begone, damned soul, to Hell away!"
And see! from his cot, Medardus arise!
A luminous glint his face glorifies,
His vacant eyes at distance stare,
As if by a vision enraptured there:
Then, suddenly, tears down his cheeks streaming ran:
To the brothers Medardus to speak began:
"I once was a priest, was pious like you,
Devoutly I read my breviary too,
With a fear and a fervor that rose to a flood,
For young were my limbs, and hot was my blood:
The flaxen locks hung down from my head
As if streams of gold were overspread;
And when first they did my tonsuring,
It was like they mowed the meadows in Spring.
That was the time when our native land
Was held in the grip of Satan's hand:
To lives of shame the women were turned,

And witches were bound at the stake and
burned.
That time, there came, as I sat there,
In the dead of night, my lamp aglare,
A rap on my door, a knock, a shout—
'We need you, father, make haste, come
out!'
The night was dark, and hollow the squall
As I was led to a bastion wall
Deep under the earth, down a slippery
flight,
Till it seemed that Hell must heave in
sight.
A torch within my hand was placed;
In a wall of stone, a hole I faced:
'A witch to-morrow, in fire aglow,
Atones for her sins: to her now go:
A blessed death for her prepare,
And save her sinful soul by prayer!'
The bowels of the earth I sought,
And in my throat my breath was caught:
From somewhere came a grating sound
Of clanking chains, and grief profound;

And in the darkest corner lay,
As in its lair a beast of prey,
A woman cowering and bent,
Her head against the damp wall leant:
The torch I fastened to a rung
That from the ceiling, hanging, swung:
'Thy face upon me turn,' I said:
'Come, sister, here, be not afraid.'
I saw how her ear my greetings drank—
How hand after hand from her face she sank:
Her head she turned, then looked to see,
And on her knees she crawled to me:
Her naked arms my knees embrace,
Her eyes are rooted on my face:
I looked down, the torch, with dancing light,
Illumined her beautiful face outright:
I felt my heart melt, warmed by hers—
My eyes were filled with scalding tears;
My lips were mute, as pity crept,
And silent, sobbing, we both wept;
And when my tears she saw, at last,

With trembling arms, she held me fast;
A sob deep out of her bosom sprang,
From stammering lips a whisper rang:
'Thou canst still weep? Thou weepest for me?
As I love the good Saviour, I love also thee.'
I was seized by fright at her words of disgrace:
'Recall the hour: remember the place
Thy body to-morrow in flames shall burn:
Repent, confess, to Heaven turn!'
With startled mien she said to me:
'Why must I do penance? From guilt I am free.
My parents are dead: alone in a dell,
With grandmother, I was wont to dwell:
My grandmother knew many herbs that cure,
And many a potion prepared for the poor:
But grandmother, bound at the stake, was burned
As a devil's witch—so I have learned.

An ancient song my grandmother sang,
I learned from her lips, so sweetly it rang:
She told me it came from a far-away land
Whose people love-magic could understand:
I sang it, but knew not its meaning: then
I was seized by the hands of heartless men
And thrown into prison—this dungeon cell:
They said that it was the worm of Hell
That sang out of me to corrupt the race:
So to-morrow I burn at the stake in disgrace.'

Her tremulous lips to my ear closely press,
Her eye is imploring, in fright and distress;
On mine her heaving bosom lies—
'Oh, save me!' said she. 'Oh, save me!' she cries:
'To live is so sweet, and death is so dire,
And dreadful the anguish to perish by fire:
No creature have I offended or grieved,
No sin have I done, nor witchcraft conceived:
The hearts of men are just like stone,

But thou art good, thou still canst moan:
The jailer sleeps, the door is free,
Come, let me fly, and fly with me!
We'll tread so softly that none may hear,
The torch we shall smother, no light to fear;
The turret gate leads out to the field,
No one can see, to none must we yield:
When break of day the cocks have told,
We shall be far away, in the distant wold:
The forest is dark, the trees are dense,
I know a place that no one shall sense:
I know a region—the very spot
A treasure lies hidden and long forgot:
We shall search and find it: thou'lt take it away,
Afar we shall fly, and there we will stay,
In a foreign land, just thou with me,
And ever and ever, just I with thee.
No woman hast thou held close to thy breast,
Nor hast thou the love of a woman possessed:

Richer the love that thou shalt know
Than any man on earth, I trow:
The stars are fading, the hours race by,
It is time, it is time! Oh, come, let us
fly!'

Her heated breath like the storm-wind
blew,
Her white arms round my neck she threw;
Her hair as dark as the wings of night,
Her limbs encircled, voluptuous sight!
With reeling head and with writhing heart,
Ecstatic, lustful passions start;
I bent lower down, her kisses I sought,
Then, trembling, I felt as if back again
brought:
'Thou kissest a witch, thou blessest her
crime:
No share in God's favor hast thou for all
time.'
The word upon my lips was dead:
I flung her from my heart and fled,
By terror driven from her dwelling—

Her screams with despair and grief were welling:
She fell to the earth, she lay on the stones,
And after me followed her sobs and her groans:
But I fled on, out into the night,
On my knees in prayer, awake until light,
Till the night had passed, till the horror was born—
And the horror came at the break of dawn.

The heaven blazed with morning flame,
The people swarming, hurrying came:
In a field far out, where logs were massed,
The stake stood dark, by gloom o'ercast—
And every eye was fixed on the pyre—
There stood she, awaiting her torture by fire.

Like fluttering birds lost out at sea,
So shifted her eyes round anxiously;
Then nearer, with crucifix I drew—

Her searching gaze held me in view—
And see! and see, how furtively
Her head she bows, slightly nodding to me,
A smile her lovely face upon,
Like the fading light of the setting sun!

The flaming brand the torchman swung,
Her languorous eyes on mine were hung;
The flames the branches dry wrapped round,
Her staring eyes held me spell-bound:
Like dust disturbed, the sparklets shivered,
Like falling leaves, her two lips quivered;
And shortly, asudden, I heard a ringing
From burning brush—she had started singing!

Like Spring showers rustling in the night,
So gripped me her song, with its sweet, blessed might;
As if air exotic from alien blooms
Had borrowed and brought their rich perfumes:

As though, said a voice in my ear, thou shalt never
Enjoy the delights thou hast lost forever.
The flames enveloped her naked feet,
She gave a last greeting—a nod discrete:
The black smoke rising around her swirled,
Her pitiful song with the smoke was whirled:
(Deep roared the flames to heaven springing,
Like tremulous bells, she kept up her singing)
My ears with both my hands defending,
'That singing! that singing! When is it ending?'
I turned with a shudder and fled from the spot—
That heart-breaking voice would leave me not:
Wherever I hastened, and whence sped away,
That song, that song, was with me alway;
And whether asleep or awake in prayer,

All day, all night, and everywhere
Since then—it is fifty years to-day—
I hear it forever and ever stay!"

(Medardus looked wild and arose from his cot.)
"I hear her again: perceive ye it not?
Up the walk, through the door, it draweth near!
She treads on the threshold—is here! is here!
Thou woman pure—a witch so they claim,
Thou lovely form that they branded with shame,
Ye luscious lips, ye eyes languid, tender,
Thou sweet, welling bloom of limbs sportive, slender,
Thou rapturous bliss, once offered to me,
Which, disdaining, I thrust into Eternity,
Thou offerest the blessing my crime cast aside,
For me, heaven's door thou openest wide:

After fifty years of penance and pain,
I come and forever with thee shall remain!"

He raised up his arms—his limbs rigid
stay:
"Medardus is dead," the brothers low say:
They knelt in a circle: the gray dawn broke
Through the windows—the prior spoke:
"What human eyes cannot grasp nor see,
To One above shall manifest be:
It is he that hath said, 'Judgment is mine.'
Go, brothers, pray: to judge is not thine!"

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